

# The Limitations Love Makes: An Interview with Laura McCullough

Laura McCullough is the author of two books of poetry, *What Men Want* and *The Dancing Bear*, as well as a chapbook of prose poems, *Elephant Anger*. Her work has appeared recently in *The American Poetry Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Crab Orchard*, *Guernica*, and other journals.

**James May:** Though your work doesn't resemble theirs exactly, it does remind me of the poetry of other female poets who have written and written well (and, I might add, fairly) about masculinity—I'm thinking of Marie Howe and Sharon Olds. Have either of those poets, or others, helped you to explore and perhaps even understand, to borrow the phrase from the title, what men want?

**Laura McCullough:** Both Marie Howe and Sharon Olds are important poets, but I do not, generally, think of them as female poets, nor do I think I found permissions in their work regarding subject. My interest in the subject of gender, and masculinities in particular, was arrived at from the conditions of my life: I grew up with only brothers on a street full of boys with a father and then a stepfather I was (and am) deeply attached to, and then, for a very long time, I had only sons (I now have four sons and a daughter). Further, my mother was raised, essentially, as an only child with only a father, and so, my mother and I were both imprinted early in our lives with what I have come to call "the man-code." In fact, for a long time, I was ill-equipped emotionally and psychically in relationships that rely on codes of conduct and behavior that girls learn when young. There was a long period of my life where I felt outside of gender because of this.

Olds, Howe, Bryant Voigt, Frost, Duhamel, Pegeen Kelly, Addonizzio, Trethaway, Peacock, Oliver, Rich, and Boland (to name some practicing poets who are female that come to mind most quickly), illumine many different concerns and obsessions in their respective oeuvres. None of these writers, to me, are women first; rather they are poets first. I have had the chance to study under or with, as you might have it, several of these poets, and they have enlarged me with their teaching as well as their writing mostly through the sustained attention to and considered thought they have given poetry, their own and others.

My most important influences have, by accident or not, however, been male, most crucially, Stephen Dunn.

**JM:** I'd love to hear how Dunn has influenced you.

**LM:** Southern NJ was lucky to have Stephen Dunn at its literary center. I first met him when I was a freshman, seventeen years old. Back then, I think few of us knew how important Stephen would become to poetry, but we did know he was special. Bearded, alternately vivacious and serious, he brought a gravitas to Stockton, and the visiting writers series—and the cocktail after-parties—where I really cut my social and intellectual teeth. I was a very

slow learner and late bloomer, but Stephen was tolerant of me for a very long time. He is a remarkable friend and rarely lets someone go, and seems unwilling, though he is a pragmatist in many ways, to shut the door on the possibility that someone will change or, in the case of writing, to finally make the shift from being a hobby poet to a serious one. He has enormous good will and patience tempered by very strong self-preserving behaviors and boundaries.

It is my good fortune to have been his student on and off for my entire adult life, and much of my interiority and aesthetics has been formed in large measure out of my relationship with the man as well as the poet. In life, he is loving and forgiving; in matters of mind and poetry, though he never—as far as I am concerned, though others may report differently—makes anyone feel ashamed for not knowing something or for having come out of intellectual impoverishment, he is nonetheless rigorous and demanding. If I send him a poem, he is unable to not respond. Always, he sees surgically what must be done to save it, to reveal its true golden thread, or to kill it mercifully. Or not mercifully. In matters of poetry, he suffers no dross. We have had many conversations about poetry, love, gambling, aesthetics, competition; he is as contrary in real life as on the page. Curious, but not presupposing. Gregarious, but not doting. The most important thing is, always, the story. One of his favorite quotes is the Eluard one "There is another world, and it is in this one." That sums up Stephen and his work, and it is emblematic of what he opened in me.

My new work (*Speech Acts*, forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press in 2010) will show a great departure from the current book, *What Men Want*, which reveals echoes of Dunn signature rhythms. I don't think Stephen likes the *Speech Acts* poems, but I hope the newest book, recently finished and unpublished, *Panic*, shows more integration of his influence with my own authority. He directly influenced, through a series of hefty conversations on poetics in the summer of 2008, the generation of these poems, one of which—the first, I believe, from that manuscript—*New South* published. So a nod to you, as well, James, as you gave me the green light to start sending out those poems, and since, quite a few have found homes.

**JM:** So much of *What Men Want* seems to be about time. In "Clearly, On a Trampoline," you regret that the children jumping up and down won't "stay there long enough" for you to paint them; "The Boy With Down Syndrome" stops on the briefest of moments, the fraction of a second when a galloping horse has all its hooves off the ground; and "Genuflect" ends with the lovely lines, "For a moment, / I loved this cat. Then, I let her go." I could go on and on and on. Frost has that famous argument about poetry being a "momentary stay against confusion;" do you think it can also be a stay against time?

**LM:** First, since you asked about women poets and you mentioned "Genuflect," that poem, of course, references the famous Bishop poem, "The Fish," which was important to me as a child (my mother read to me every night from *The Children's Golden Treasury of Poetry*) though it would be years before I really understood it or Bishop. As for a concern with time and whether poetry can stay it, I would say no; time is inexorable. If anything, my concerns there stem from the Francis Bacon quote: "He who hath taken wife and child hath given hostages to fortune." I return to this often and, in fact, am working on a new series of poems, the working title of which is *Women and Other Hostages*. The quote goes on to indict those of us who have loves as being unable to rise above the limitations that love makes on our lives. Think of what you wouldn't reveal if your child was in danger, what you wouldn't sell to cure

a lover's cancer; the list is endless. The rest of the quote suggests that loves "are impediments to great enterprises, either of virtue or mischief. Certainly the best works, and of greatest merit for the public, have proceeded from the unmarried or childless." As a mother of five, of course, I find this nonsense. Everything, however, is elegiac, and there is beauty in that, I think.

**JM:** And yet doesn't a lot of your poetry come from these "limitations that love makes"?

**LM:** That's interesting and likely stems back to influence from Stephen Dunn, noted contrarian that he is. Resistance and tension. Stephen always said "Every great love poem requires a 'but.'" Recently, he's amended that saying that the truly great love poem doesn't have one. Earlier in my writing, it was important to scrupulously root out sentimentality, to go to the edge of it and find, not the precious, but the razor's edge of beauty and elegy, love as well as its diminishments, the secrets underneath the platitudinal. I am interested in incongruity, juxtaposition, and paradox.

**JM:** And I'm still convinced you've found some secret with time. I know very few mothers or fathers of five who write so prolifically; you've had two books and a chapbook out, all in under five years, and a new one coming out next year. Usually that's a red flag, but your poems don't seem rushed, don't repeat themselves. How you kept your work from falling into those traps?

**LM:** In addition to the third book of poetry forthcoming, I have another completed and am placing the individual poems, am at work on a new poetry series, have written two novels (both under consideration with small presses though these are tough times for prose acquisition), am at work on a third novel, and I write book reviews and essays now and then when I love someone work (Hoagland, Dunn, Dubus III). Whew. It sounds like I'm bragging, but I'm not. Here's the story:

In 2001, I was pregnant with a baby I had tried for three years by horrendous medical means to have. On 911, I lost that baby. I live in New Jersey and teach in the county most hard hit with deaths and had a brother in the Towers (who survived), and so 911 was a disaster for me on the macrocosmic level with everyone else and on the microcosmic level losing that child. I felt public and personal grief unlike anything I experienced before, and it irrevocably changed me. At first, my interior world was wrecked. I learned that not only am I not my body, but I am not my mind either. My mind was reeling and unsteady. As I learned about grief, I discovered I could choose anger and bitterness or I could choose increased sympathy and empathy for others' and the fragility of the human condition and that this could be transmuted through art. I chose the latter, and I don't think I'm unique in this; many people come to art through grief. I committed to poetry and to my writing in ways I had not before. People ask me all the time how I can raise five kids, teach a full load at a community college, and still write so much. I've thought about this a lot. The truest answer is one I gave one day when not thinking; I just blurted out, "because I'm going to die soon." This is both silly and so true.

I'll be giving a lecture at the Pine Manor Summer Solstice Conference in June on "Writing in the Fourth Dimension" and will speak about the process of committing to writing and still living in the world.

**JM:** Your comments about grief interest me. In his Nobel Lecture, Czeslaw Milosz argues that the poet must see and describe both the macroscopic and microscopic at the same time. I think you're right that many people come to art through grief, but the macrocosmic feelings are, I think, rarer than the micro and probably tied to sympathy and empathy. I see both visions working in *What Men Want*, and I wonder if you could talk a little about how these macro and microscopic views work themselves into your poetry. Or perhaps they are the feelings that cause your poetry to happen?

**LM:** I recently read in a WTC tribute at Ground Zero, so it's funny you should ask about grief on the micro and macro cosmic levels. I read poems. One is called "Nell and Mae" and is about two female ancestors of mine, a great grandmother on the Irish side and a grandmother on the Italian side, neither of whom I ever met. The poem tries to explore my sense of self as a woman in relation to what these two women did in their journeys to America from Ireland and Italy. The second poem I was invited to read, "The Flags We Raise," is about trans-racial adoption, as I have two children adopted from Taiwan.

These poems, it seems to me, address the line of my life from past to future, and I love that they span countries and time. In grief—the leaving of a place to take the risks of a new life, the loss of a biological family as one is adopted into a new one—there is possibility and, even, joy, though sometimes, as in the case of Nell and Mae, they can't see what their lives opened up for me, and I wish they could. I hope my poems honor the macrocosmic elements of these stories while be grounded in the specific. It is generally through the specific that one arrives at something universal.

**JM:** As you're addressing this transition in your life from "past to future" as you put it, how, if at all, have your poems changed formally?

**LM:** Well, someone else may answer that better than me. I do think about such things, but not in a really metacognitive way. I am busy being inside the work, I think. Right now, what's obsessing me has to do with line length, unit of attention, and breath. The next book, *Speech Acts*, was very concerned with linguistics and also with rhythm. *Panic*, the unpublished manuscript is highly narrative with lyric departures, but the poems are low on metaphor; rather they accrue to metaphor. In order to deal with the story elements, I found myself imposing structures on the poems, a way of creating containers in which I had to compress the material. Otherwise, they wouldn't be poems, but story. The newest work is where I am exploring the line as a signature of my breath, and I may be arriving, finally, at something that might be my music. The development of ear is very ongoing for me. I'm listening much more closely than I ever have before, to my own work as well as to others.

If it seems as if I work a lot, it is, perhaps, because I am obsessed always with what ways I can move past what I have already done, and I am driven by this sense of insufficiency, of not having gotten anything right yet. I have four line of my own work I really feel good about, that I can claim. This is not a woeful thing, but a hopeful one, but being a writer is a lifetime's apprenticeship, and I have so many skills yet to get control of, so much of my mind yet unformed, so much that I haven't read yet. Given that, I am less interested in how my poems have changed then in how they will change in the future.